

The Future of the Urban Forestry Profession: Next Steps for Urban Forestry 2020

by Susan D. Day, Associate Professor at Virginia Tech and Project Leader for UF2020

You may have seen presentations about Urban Forestry 2020 (UF2020) last November at the SMA Annual Conference in Indianapolis or read about the project in the [May/June 2016 issue](#) of *City Trees*. Perhaps you completed a survey for us (if so, thank you!). Urban Forestry 2020 is a multi-year collaborative project to analyze the status of the urban forestry profession in the United States and recommend strategies for moving it forward.

For the past few years, this research and networking project, partially funded by a U.S. Forest Service grant through the National Urban and Community Forestry Advisory Council (NUCFAC), has been intensively studying the professionalization of urban forestry. UF2020 has conducted national surveys of undergraduate stu-

dents, practicing urban foresters, and members of allied professions such as planning and landscape architecture and has conducted an analysis of the job market for those specializing in urban forestry.

How is the SMA Involved?

The UF2020 Steering Committee was selected from leaders around the country within urban forestry and associated fields such as stormwater engineering, urban planning, and landscape architecture. It includes SMA Executive Director Jerri LaHaie and ISA Executive Director Jim Skiera (for a full list of steering committee members, see the project website at urbanforestry.frec.vt.edu/2020).

This committee has been serving in an advisory capac-



What does an urban forester bring to the table? Urban foresters and allies must communicate this to the public.



UF2020 finds that, with the exception of SMA interns like Kelly Swarhout, high school and college students have virtually no awareness of urban forestry as a professional career.

ity and as a project sounding board to date. However, next steps call for developing mechanisms for sustained action, networking, organization, and conversation. This is where the steering committee members and individual urban foresters around the country need to come together to support their profession. In addition, the SMA is a member of the Sustainable Urban Forests Coalition (SUFC). This organization includes over thirty professional and nonprofit organizations that participate in urban forestry (see sufc.org) and is a potential avenue for an inclusive organization that would bring all those who practice urban forestry together.

The Issues

In January 2017, UF2020 held a series of frank meetings with the members of its steering committee about a plan of action for the profession of urban forestry. The committee addressed the following issue:

In spite of projected increasing need for urban forestry expertise, professional urban foresters are not present in many communities and their value and expertise are not always recognized by colleagues, employers, and the public—endangering the sustainability of the profession. Yet, successful management of our national urban forest ecosystems relies on professionals with specialized knowledge in urban and community forestry being deployed in cities and towns and integrated into community decision making. National leadership is needed to foster the emergence of urban forestry as a fully recognized and valued profession with the professional support mechanisms to ensure its sustainability and effectiveness.

UF2020 seeks to identify a path through which this national leadership can emerge and take effective action in both the short and long term. The project has identified a suite of issues facing the urban forestry profession. All of these relate to some degree to the public image of urban forestry—how urban forestry is communicated, institutionalized, and practiced. In a nutshell, UF2020 research found:

1. There is significant confusion about what urban forestry is, who practices it, what an urban forester should know, and what they bring to the decision-making table.
2. There is no clear and accessible career

path for those who wish to be urban foresters and no recognized path to professional advancement. There are significant gaps in the career ladder available to potential urban foresters.

3. With the exception of the SMA, most professional networks for urban foresters appear to be regional or local and there are insufficient avenues for addressing critical issues of professionalization at a national level. One potential challenge in this arena is the multiple professional identities of those who practice urban forestry.
4. There are substantial geographic gaps in job opportunities for urban foresters across the U.S.
5. Universities have developed urban forestry programs, but low enrollment jeopardizes their continuation.
6. High school and college students have virtually no awareness of urban forestry as a professional career.

The steering committee additionally identified issues within our profession and strategies for addressing them. These include:

- defining the boundaries and scope of what it means to be an urban forester;
- having national and inclusive meetings or engaging meta organizations to bring diverse professions together to discuss these issues and take action;
- strategizing to diversify job settings for urban foresters. For example, can private sector opportunities be expanded? What types of organizations (corporate campuses?) would benefit from urban foresters? and
- analyzing the urban forestry career ladder to fill in gaps and create mentorship opportunities.

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Communicating Your Role as an Urban Forester

Urban forestry faces a range of challenges relating to public perception, professional practice, educational opportunities, and university support for the profession of urban forestry. At the heart of this is the professional image of urban foresters—and this is something that members of any profession need to assiduously manage on an ongoing basis.

Thus, is urban forestry communicating consistently to the larger world about the urban forestry profession? The world needs to know:

- What does an urban forester bring to the table? What can an urban forester do for our community or organization?
- What makes an urban forester? How do I recognize urban forestry expertise?
- Is urban forestry a meaningful and well-respected profession with ample opportunity for professional advancement?
- How should a young person approach a career in urban forestry? What should they study and whom should they seek as mentors? Can they specialize?

Final Steps for Urban Forestry 2020

This research and analysis project is coming to a close in fall of 2017. This is just the beginning, however, of the professional collective action and organization that needs to take place for the benefit of the urban forestry profession—and ultimately urban forests. Healthy, strong professions continually self-evaluate and organize initiatives to strengthen their professions. How will urban foresters tackle this challenge? We who are involved in the UF2020 project look forward to finding out and playing a role in supporting this effort.



Other members of the UF2020 research team include Gregory A. Dahle (West Virginia University) P. Eric Wiseman (Virginia Tech), Joe Sullivan (University of Maryland), Joel Koci (Virginia State), Keith O'Herrin (Virginia Tech), and Andrew Benjamin (West Virginia University). For more details, visit urbanforestry.frec.vt.edu/2020.

What should young people interested in urban forestry study and whom should they seek as mentors? SMA intern Frank Terrance went to Upper Arlington, Ohio in 2013 to learn with longtime parks & forestry superintendent Steve Cothrel.

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